

## Floodplain manager skillsets are key to effectively growing community engagement practice in disaster resilience

*Andrew Gissing*

In partnership with the NSW State Emergency Service, Risk Frontiers conducted a survey of twenty participants at the Floodplain Management Australia conference held in May, 2017. Participants were from the floodplain risk management industry and represented Local and State Government, emergency services, research groups and private sector consultants from NSW, QLD and VIC.

Overall, there was clear recognition of the importance of involving community members in floodplain risk management and emergency planning processes, with acknowledgment that community members have valuable knowledge about local flood risks and vulnerable people in their communities. Though participants believed that community members should be active in decision-making processes, there were mixed views as to whether the community should have the ultimate say about how floods are managed.

Most participants identified that communities are currently consulted in the development of floodplain risk management plans and emergency plans (40%). Others enabled the community to comment on draft plans or said the community was not involved at all. Only three respondents indicated that communities work in collaboration with local authorities to develop floodplain risk management plans, and one respondent indicated the community works collaboratively with emergency services to develop joint emergency plans.

The largest barrier to the involvement of community members in floodplain risk management and emergency planning was said to be a lack of practitioner skills or confidence to effectively engage with communities. Other barriers included lack of community interest in participation, over confidence in the ability of experts to make decisions on behalf of communities, time and budget pressures and the inertia of existing historical practices. There was acknowledgement that engagement needed to be well facilitated to achieve effective and inclusive outcomes that did not just recognise the loudest voices in the room.

Over 90% of respondents believed that processes to involve communities in floodplain risk management and flood emergency planning needed to be improved. Participants nominated the following ways to improve community participation:

- Ensure enough time is allocated to enable community involvement, whilst recognising that the community has its own timelines and ignorance of these will stem the community's willingness to engage;
- Tailor engagement approaches for each community, including understanding the unique needs of the community and the ways in which they want to be involved;
- Communicate actual real world flood experiences, by giving flood risk a sense of realism;

- Build critical flood awareness amongst community members and then seek their involvement; and
- Attempt to communicate technical concepts in plain English.

With disaster management policies in Australia placing greater emphasis on encouraging community participation in emergency management there would appear to be a need based upon this limited research to promote further skills and experience amongst practitioners regarding effective community engagement practices. Further research should also focus on the identification of community member motivations and barriers to involvement in disaster risk management planning across multiple community contexts.

Thanks to those who took part in the survey. For further information on recent research into community involvement in emergency planning see [ajem.infoservices.com.au/items/AJEM-32-02-15](http://ajem.infoservices.com.au/items/AJEM-32-02-15).